

Chapter Six

“Caught in the Crossfire Between Camps”: Gloria Anzaldúa

As the lesbian writer whose name is most likely to turn up in texts by both Rich and Butler, Gloria Anzaldúa with her concept of “*mestiza* consciousness” is one answer to these rhetorical riddles. Of all the poets under study in *Identity Poetics*, Anzaldúa is the one most frequently and approvingly invoked by queer and other poststructuralist theorists. Yet, Anzaldúa traverses the boundary between queer theory and lesbian feminism (poststructuralist theory and identity politics) as surely as she straddles boundaries of race, nation, language, genre, and gender—a process of *mestizaje* whose articulation is the objective of her germinal 1987 book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.

In one of the many poems liberally interspersed throughout the otherwise prose-dominated first half of the book, Anzaldúa figures the crossroads she inhabits as a place of struggle:

*Una lucha de fronteras / A Struggle of Borders*¹

Because I, a *mestiza*,
continually walk out of one culture
and into another,
because I am in all cultures at the same time,
alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,
me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.
Estoy norteadada por todas las voces que me hablan
simultáneamente.
[soul in between two worlds, three, four,
my head rings with the contradictory.
I am disoriented by all the voices that speak to me
simultaneously.] (99)²

Given the argumentative rhetoric of the lesbian-feminist/queer theory "debate" and Anzaldúa's position straddling the divide, the connotation of *lucha* as "battle" and the cognate *frontera* as the "front" may seem apt, if exaggerated. But Anzaldúa rejects the battle for supremacy of one over the other; instead, she expresses the state of being both/and/neither, the border existence of the new *mestiza*, a culturally specific, complex, and self-conscious articulation of identity poetics. In an oft-quoted passage from *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa reworks Virginia Woolf's famous proclamation, declaring the *mestiza* a transgressor of boundaries and a creator of a new culture based on elements of the old ones, on components of her identity, and on interpersonal relationships both actual and potential:

As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet. (102–3)

Anzaldúa seeks not to transcend differences but to inhabit them in all their messy multiplicity. "*Soy un amasamiento*," she writes, "I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining" (103). She "kneads" her personal experiences, reclaimed cultural symbols, history of oppression, and political resistance into a text at once analytic and mystical, literary and visionary. Throughout, in the mixed-genre style of the book's first half and the poetry of its second half, she presses the point that hers is a multifaceted existence and politics that cannot be separated into component parts with claims to priority or unique allegiance.

To the extent that a distinct body of Latina lesbian literature can be periodized,³ its critical mass emerged later than the initial lesbian-feminist literary explosion of the 1970s, the black lesbian-feminist outpouring of the late 1970s and early 1980s (represented in the anthology *Home Girls*), and the multiracial "women of color" boom of the early 1980s (highlighted by the publication of *This Bridge Called My Back* in 1981). Notably marked by the publication of texts such as Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the anthology *Compañeras: Latina Lesbians* in 1987, and the anthology *Chicana Lesbians* in

1991, it came—is still coming—at a theoretically post-identity politics moment. The paradox is obvious, and it is apparent in much Latina lesbian writing, which incorporates both a positional identity politics and the multiplicity more commonly associated with postmodernism. As articulated by Chicana feminist critic Norma Alarcón, who herself employs the tools of poststructuralist theory, this complex standpoint is “too readily viewed as representing ‘postmodern fragmented identities’”:

The so-called postmodern decentered subject—a decentralization which implies diverse, multiply constructed subjects and historical conjunctures—insofar as she desires liberation must move towards provisional solidarities, especially through social movements. In this fashion, one may recognize the endless production of differences to destabilize group or collective identities, on the one hand, and the need for group solidarities to overcome oppression through an understanding of the mechanisms at work, on the other. (“Chicana Feminism,” 376)

In other words, a sense of identity and group solidarity are necessary in the face of racism, sexism, and homophobia, despite the widely accepted poststructuralist analysis of unitary identity as illusory. Phelan explains the “revolutionary force” of Anzaldúa’s *mestiza*; hers is

the ability to refuse the reifications of cultural nationalism without abandoning the nation entirely, and to provide links to class-based movements without becoming subsumed within them. Because she never simply “is” any one element of her blended being, the *mestiza* cannot be captured in the oppositions that are presented as inevitable; class *or* nation, sex *or* race, or any other reified opposition. (*Getting Specific*, 74–75)

While “race,” for example, may be understood as a bankrupt historical and social construction, racism is all too materially prevalent. Hence, Latina lesbian feminism, including Anzaldúa’s new *mestiza* politics, embraces at least a “strategic essentialism” in culturally specific manifestations. Chela Sandoval explains that “assimilationist, integrationist, revolutionary, supremacist, [and] separatist” tactics may be used in the service of “U.S. Third World Feminism,” which should be understood as “a theory and method of oppositional consciousness.” Anzaldúa’s *mestiza* consciousness is a leading *teoría*,⁴ as Sandoval makes obvious in an encyclopedia entry defining “U.S. Third World Feminism” that she titles “Mestizaje as Method” (361).⁵

Borderlands/La Frontera epitomizes Chicana lesbian identity poetics. Anzaldúa's invocation of indigenous symbols, precolonial history, and evolutionary biologisms (especially in chapter 7, "*La conciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness*") would mark her work as irretrievably essentialist if these and other textual elements were not constantly subverted to a constructionist purpose. As Judith Raitskin explains, "Anzaldúa envisions a collapse of the systems of categorization through the 'mestiza' and 'queer' consciousness created by them" ("Inverts," 159). She can get away with a passage like this one—"The mestizo and the queer exist at this time and point on the evolutionary continuum for a purpose. We are a blending that proves that all blood is intricately woven together, and that we are spawned out of similar souls" (107)—because of its juxtaposition with this one, and others like it:

[The mestiza] puts history through a sieve. . . . This step is a conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions. She communicates that rupture, documents the struggle. She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths. . . . Deconstruct, construct. (104)

Anzaldúa uses the categories and the crossroads created by their intersections to create mestiza consciousness. She may use the language of essentialism, but she uses it differently, metaphorically, in a manner that serves radically subversive ends (Raitskin, "Inverts," 159, 161). The development of a mestiza consciousness, which Anzaldúa describes as an ongoing dynamic process, uses cultural and other identitarian tools but does not reify group identity status.

Borderlands/La Frontera in the Context of El Movimiento

In the service of their creative political project, Chicana lesbian feminists like Anzaldúa build upon and react to other identity politics movements, each with their own mix of "tactical essentialism" and overt constructionism. *El Movimiento*, the Chicano power movement that began in the 1960s, serves prominently both as model and foil. Just as women of color were active in lesbian feminism from the beginning, Chicanas (including Chicana lesbians) always participated in *El Movimiento* though much of their early contribution remains unrecognized. The surge of Chicana feminism in the 1980s, responding to both the sexism of *El Movimiento* and the racism of the women's and lesbian-feminist movements, "has given new life to a stalled Chicano movement" (Alarcón, "Chicana," 372). Like the cultural-national-

ist Chicano movement, Chicana feminist writing often relies on precolonial (and to some extent postcolonial) Mexican and indigenous imagery. For El Movimiento the *Virgen de Guadalupe* proved a powerful symbol. *La Virgen*, a manifestation of the Catholic Virgin Mary, is said to have appeared in 1531 and, speaking the Aztec language Nahuatl, told a poor *indio* that she would be the protector of his people. Anzaldúa explains that "*la Virgen de Guadalupe* is the single most potent religious, political and cultural image of the Chicano/*mexicano*. She, like my race, is a synthesis of the old world and the new, of the religion and culture of the two races in our psyche, the conquerors and the conquered" (52). Anzaldúa identifies more closely with a predecessor of *la Virgen*, the azteca-mexica Coatlicue, symbolic of a more vigorous precolonial female agency. According to Anzaldúa, Coatlicue is the earliest "Mesoamerican fertility and Earth goddesses," from whom is descended Coatlopoeh (the name *la Virgen* called herself when she appeared in the sixteenth century, homophonous to the Spanish Guadalupe). The "creator goddess," Coatlicue "had a human skull or serpent for a head, a necklace of human hearts, a skirt of twisted serpents and taloned feet" (49), images that show up repeatedly in Anzaldúa's writings.

Like Lorde's invocation of Seboulisa, Anzaldúa employs the image of Coatlicue to express creative power in a female figure specific to her culture of origin. Invoked by Anzaldúa as Sappho is invoked by Grahn, Coatlicue is vital to Anzaldúa's writing process and to her continual creation of *mestiza* consciousness. In chapter 4 of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, titled "The Coatlicue State," Anzaldúa describes at length the wrenching process of literary and self-creation.⁶ The poems "Letting Go" (186–88), "Poets have strange eating habits" (162–63), and "Creature of Darkness" (208–9) similarly convey Anzaldúa's difficult and spiritual creative journeys. "Letting Go" most closely parallels her description of "The Coatlicue State" as it describes the nearly grotesque compulsion to undergo painful transformations.

You must plunge your fingers
into your navel, with your two hands
split open,
spill out the lizards and horned toads
the orchids and the sunflowers,
turn the maze inside out.
Shake it. (ll. 3–9)

It's not enough
letting go twice, three times,

a hundred. Soon everything is
 dull, unsatisfactory.
 Night's open face
 interests you no longer.
 And soon, again, you return
 to your element and
 like a fish to the air
 you come to the open
 only between breathings.
 But already gills
 grow on your breasts. (ll. 62–74)

Like "Letting Go," the other two poems employ animal imagery associated with the Coatlicue state. In "Poets have strange eating habits," the narrator rides a "balking mare" (l. 3) into the earth's "*abismo*" (l. 24), or "abyss," repeatedly, like "an addiction" (l. 57), taking on attributes of birds and snakes. "Creature of Darkness" depicts the immobilization of the Coatlicue state that precedes the transformed emergence into creative action. While hiding in the darkness wanting "not to think" (l. 10), the narrator relates to the salamander, the mole, the bat, and, once again, the snake that is so closely identified with Coatlicue, Lady of the Serpent Skirt.

Other poems employ precolonial as well as traditional Chicano/mexicano images. Snakes appear again in "*La curandera*" ("The Healer," 198–201), for example. Chicanas' ancient lineage is lauded in "*No se raje, Chicanita/Don't Give In, Chicanita*" (222–25).

. . . they will never take that pride
 of being *mexicana*-Chicana-*tejana*
 nor our Indian woman's spirit.
 And when the Gringos are gone—
 see how they kill one another—
 here we'll still be like the horned toad and the lizard
 relics of an earlier age
 survivors of the First Fire Age—*el Quinto Sol*. (ll. 23–30)

La Llorona, one of the three dominant female archetypes of Chicano/a culture, the ghostly mother who wails in the night for her lost children, is the subject of "My Black *Angelos*" (206–7). Anzaldúa explains that "*la Guadalupe*, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, *la Chingada* (*Malinche*), the

raped mother whom we have abandoned, and *la Llorona*" have all been used against Chicanas—*la Llorona* "to make us long-suffering people" (52–53). But in "My Black *Angelos*," while the narrator initially fears *la Llorona*, the wailing woman is depicted as powerful and ultimately is incorporated into the narrator herself. Her "Taloned hand" reminiscent of Coatlicue,

She crawls into my spine
her eyes opening and closing,
shining under my skin in the dark
whirling my bones twirling
till they're hollow reeds.

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Una mujer vaga en la noche

[A woman wanders in the night]

anda errante con las almas de los muertos.

[travels errantly with the souls of the dead.]

We sweep through the streets

con el viento corremos

[with the wind we run]

we roam with the souls of the dead. (ll. 27–37)

La Llorona here is depicted as a dark angel, not a demon or witch, by an author for whom darkness is one aspect of her self-concept. Anzaldúa describes Coatlicue, her totem deity, as one of the "darkened" aspects of the goddess Tonantsi-Coatloapeuh and ultimately Guadalupe. She also identifies *La Llorona* in the poem as somewhat disrespected, a wandering or errant woman who is thus free.

The poems of the first two sections of the second half of the book reside primarily in El Valle, Anzaldúa's South Texas border homeland. Like the first half of the book, the poetry half begins with stories and histories of la Raza. The first poetry section, "*Más antes en los ranchos*" ("Before, on the ranches"), consists of five narrative poems, vignettes centered on a presumably autobiographical narrator, her grandmother, a woman washing and hanging out sheets, unnamed mexicanos, the animals they live among (birds, a fawn, a horse, chickens)—and frequently the white men who endanger them all. The second poetry section, "*La Pérdida*" ("The Loss"), contains seven poems focused more specifically on oppression and the desire to escape it. Subjects include the conditions of Chicanas working in the fields, sexually harassed

and raped by white bosses ("*sus plumas el viento*" ["the wind her feathers"], 138–41), the sterility of the literally trashed land left to the poor Chicanos/as ("Cultures," 142), the perils and desires of "illegal" Mexican border crosses, known as *mojados*, or "wetbacks" ("*sobre piedras con lagartijos*" ["on rocks with lizards"], 143–45), a small victory for illegal farm workers exploited by "*el sonavabitché*" (146–51). These are homages to the hardworking mexicanos/as cheated or abused by the likes of the violent, swindling white male narrator of "We Call Them Greasers" (156–57). They are dedicated to the poet's mother, to *mojaditos*, to "those who have worked in the fields" ("*Mar de repollos/A Sea of Cabbages*," 152–55).

Both of the first two poetry sections carry Mexican song lyrics as epigraphs, suggesting a cultural context for reading and understanding the poems that places them squarely in a Chicano/a tradition, even as the text wrings changes on that same tradition. "*Más antes en los ranchos*" carries a lyric from a Mexican song titled "*La Llorona*" that suggests deep sorrow is sometimes borne silently:

*Dicen que no tengo duelo, Llorona,
porque no me ven llorar.
Hay muertos que no hacen ruido, Llorona . . .*"
[They say that I have no grief, Llorona,
because they do not see me cry.
There are the dead who make no noise, Llorona . . .] (123)

Anzaldúa's verses weep aloud for the dead who do not or cannot speak for themselves, at least not in a monolingual, racist, sexist dominant culture—the long suffering grandmother of "Immaculate, Inviolable: *Como Ella*" ("Like Her," 130–33),⁷ the animals who are hunted for sport ("White-Wing Season," 124–25), murdered out of necessity ("Cervicide," 126–27), and maimed ("horse," 128–29), and the people who suffer their losses in forced silence. The title page of "*La Pérdida*" carries a verse that speaks of nostalgic longing for the homeland, from the *corrido* "*Canción Misteca*" ("Mixteca Song," 137). As important as the sentiment is the fact that the song is a *corrido*. These "songs of love and death on the Texas Mexican borderlands," which Anzaldúa grew up hearing, are "usually about Mexican heroes who do valiant deeds against the Anglo oppressors" (83). *Corridos*, marked by "a strong narrative or dramatic line . . . strongly influenced the course of Chicano poetic expression" during El Movimiento (Pérez-Torres, *Movements*, 6). Both influences show up in Anzaldúa's narrative poems valorizing the lives

and struggles of everyday heroes who prevailed or survived (the labor organizer and farm workers in "*El sonavabitch*," "She" in "*sus plumas el viento*"), and those who did not (the mojado narrator of "*sobre piedras con lagartijos*," the "troublemakers" in "We Call Them Greasers").

In keeping with the Spanish-language corrido tradition and the Chicano movement's assertion of Spanish as a valid language, most of Anzaldúa's poems include at least some Spanish words or phrases. Anzaldúa's willingness to serve as "bridge" or translator to Anglos and other non-Spanish speakers is well documented (e.g., Anzaldúa, "Bridge, Drawbridge," *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 107), but she insists on her right to speak and write her many languages as well—including Nahua, six forms of Spanish, two of English, and infinite combinations (*Borderlands/La Frontera*, 77–78). "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my voice," Anzaldúa writes (81). Aware like Lorde of "the Tradition of Silence," Anzaldúa explains how sexism silences girls and women in Chicano culture (76) and how "Linguistic Terrorism" silences Chicanos/as in the dominant culture (75–81). "I will have my voice," she asserts in response to both (59). In the poems of the book's second half, Anzaldúa's voice takes on a variety of linguistic forms. Only five of the thirty-eight poems are written entirely in English. Twenty-six include scattered words, phrases, or lines in some form of Spanish, with English glossaries appended to only about a quarter of them. While some reviewers disliked the inconsistent translation, Anzaldúa explained in an interview that what seemed "haphazard" to one reviewer (Kaye/Kantrowitz, "Crossover Dreams," 238) mirrors "the kind of border dialect that I grew up with." Further, she purposely set out to challenge "the myth of a monocultural U.S. . . . I wanted to force that awareness that this country is not what those in power say it is" (Perry, "Interview," 22).

A dozen of *Borderlands/La Frontera's* poems are written entirely in Spanish, but only two are translated into English, "*Mar de repollos/A Sea of Cabbages*," which honors the hard work, faith, and desperate hope of poor farmers, and "*No se raje, chicanita/Don't Give In, Chicanita*," an inspirational poem dedicated to Anzaldúa's niece that ends the book, assuring her,

*Sí, se me hace que en unos cuantos años o siglos
la Raza se levantará, lengua intacta
cargando lo mejor de todas las culturas.
Esa víbora dormida, la rebeldía, saltará.
Como cuero viejo caerá la esclavitud
de obedecer, de callar, de aceptar.*

*Como víbora relampagueando nos moveremos, mujercita.
¡Ya verás!* (ll. 36–43)

Yes, in a few years or centuries
la Raza will rise up, tongue intact
 carrying the best of all the cultures.
 That sleeping serpent,
 rebellion-(r)evolution, will spring up.
 Like old skin will fall the slave ways of
 obedience, acceptance, silence.
 Like serpent lightning we'll move, little woman.
 You'll see. (ll. 37–45)

Anzaldúa's Spanish tongue is intact in the ten untranslated poems, which either require work for the nonfluent Spanish speaker (and even for the Spanish speaker unfamiliar with Anzaldúa's blend of dialects) or lock out the non-Spanish speaker altogether, teaching an object lesson in monolingualism. Anzaldúa's choices to use Spanish and not to translate are not arbitrary, however. The untranslated poems take up some of her most intimate themes. In "*Compañera, cuando amábamos*" ("*Compañera*, when we were loving," 168–69), dedicated to Juanita Ramos "and other spik dykes," Anzaldúa recalls intense emotional intimacy and sensual pleasure:

*¿Volverán, compañera, esas tardes sordas
 Cuando nos amábamos tiradas en las sombras bajo otoño?
 Mis ojos clavados en tu mirada
 Tu mirada que siempre retiraba al mundo
 Esas tardes cuando nos acostábamos en las nubes* (ll. 1–5)
 [Will they return, *compañera*, those deaf afternoons
 When we loved each other in the shadows of autumn?
 My eyes fixed on your gaze
 Your gaze that always swept away the world
 Those afternoons when we lay in the clouds]

¿Te acuerdas cuando te decía ¡tócame!?
¿Cuando ilesa carne buscaba carne y dientes labios
En los laberintos de tus bocas?
Esas tardes, islas no descubiertas
Cuando caminábamos hasta la orilla.
Mis dedos lentos andaban las lomas de tus pechos,

*Recorriendo la llanura de tu espalda
Tus moras hinchándose en mi boca . . .* (ll. 17–24)
[Do you remember when I said, take me!?
When untouched flesh searched for flesh and teeth lips
In the labyrinths of your mouths?
Those afternoons, undiscovered islands
When we walked to the edge.
My slow fingers traveled the hills of your breasts,
Wandering the plains of your back
Your dark blackberries swelling in my mouth . . .] ⁸

In "*En el nombre de todas las madres que han perdido sus hijos en la guerra*" ("In the Name of All Mothers Who Have Lost Sons in the War," 182–85), Anzaldúa plumbs the depths of a mother's pain for her children lost to a nationalist, racist border "war":

*Le cubro su cabecita,
mi criatura con sus piesecitos fríos.
Aquí lo tendré acurrucado en mis brazos
hasta que me muera.* (ll. 1–4)
[I cover its little head,
my baby with its cold, tiny feet.
Here I will curl it up in my arms
until I die.]

*Madre dios, quiero matar
a todo hombre que hace guerra,
que quebra, que acaba con la vida.
Esta guerra me ha quitado todo.
¿Qué han hecho con nuestra tierra?
¿Pa' qué hacemos niños?
¿Pa' qué les damos vida?
¿Para qué sean masacrados?
¿Para qué los güeros
se burlen de la gente?
En sus ojos nosotros los indios
somos peores que los animales.* (ll. 115–26)
[Mother of God, I want to kill
every man that makes war,
that smashes, that puts an end to life.

This war has taken everything from me.
 What have they done with our land?
 Why do we make children?
 Why do we give them life?
 So that they can be massacred?
 So that the *güeros*⁹
 can ridicule the people?
 In their eyes we the *indios*
 are worse than the animals.]

Anzaldúa reports in an interview that "the more spiritual stuff" is difficult for her to translate, so poems like "*Cagado abismo, quiero saber*" (lit., "Shit-scared Abyss, I want to know"), "*mujer cacto*" ("cactus woman"), and "*Sobre piedras con lagartijos*" go untranslated (Perry, "Interview," 23–24). These poems may make many readers feel like Anzaldúa did as a Spanish-speaking child in an English-speaking educational system, when she was "supposed to pick up a little bit of English in Beginners I and II" (Perry, "Interview," 23)—a frustrating endeavor that requires rereading, hard work, and may cause a reader to throw up her hands in defeat.

Near the end of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa includes a stirring, militant anthem, all in Spanish but five lines. Titled "*Arriba mi gente*" ("Arise My People," 214–15, it is a call to mobilize the legions of "*hijas de la Chingada*" ("daughters of the Fucked One"). *La Chingada* (a derogatory name for Malinche/Malintzin) is a common Mexican curse word; she is the legendary traitor who supposedly sold out the Mexican people to the Spaniards by sleeping with Cortés and literally giving birth to the mestizo "race." Anzaldúa offers an alternative explanation of the fall of the Aztecs in chapter 3, "Entering the Serpent." She explains that the conquered tribes hated their Aztec rulers long before the Spaniards arrived because the Aztecs changed "the egalitarian traditions of a wandering tribe to those of a predatory state." The "class split" caused by the Aztec practices of conquer, rape, and taxation made the oppressed Tlaxcalans "bitter enemies" of the Aztecs. As a result, they aided the Spanish; "the Aztec nation fell not because *Malinali* (*la Chingada*) interpreted for and slept with Cortés, but because the ruling elite had subverted the solidarity between men and women and between noble and commoner" (56).¹⁰ Anzaldúa concludes, "Not me sold out my people but they me" (43–44); not women nor queers sell out la Raza, but through the image of la Chingada (the Fucked One, the traitor, the bad mother), her people harm her.¹¹

In the poem Anzaldúa calls for *las Hijas de la Chingada* to reclaim their names,

Hijas de la Chingada,
born of the violated *india*,
guerrilleras divinas—
mujeres de fuego ardiente
que dan luz a la noche oscura (ll. 24–28)
[Daughters of *la Chingada*,
born of the violated *india*,
divine guerillas—
women of ardent fire
that give light to the dark night]

In a refrain she calls on *las Hijas de la Chingada* to wage a liberation struggle:

Retornará nuestra antigua fe
y levantará el campo.
Arriba, despierten, mi gente
a liberar los pueblos. (ll. 36–39)
[Our ancient faith will return
and will cause the countryside to rise up.
Arise, awaken, my people
to liberate the towns.¹²]

The goal of Anzaldúa's call to arms is the search for *el Mundo Zurdo*, "the Left-handed World," where people who "do not fit" in dominant society come together in a "Balancing Act" to "change the world" ("*La Prieta*," 208–9): *Toda la gente junta / en busca del Mundo Zurdo* (All the people together / in search of *el Mundo Zurdo*, ll. 1–7).

The "*gente*" that "*arriba*" here are not exactly the same as the *gente que arriba* in any analogous Movimiento anthem. As Pérez-Torres notes, Anzaldúa's book is instrumental in "the transformation of 'Aztlán' from homeland to borderland signif[y]ing an opening with Chicano cultural discourse. It marks a significant transformation away from the dream of origin toward an engagement with the construction of cultural identity" (96). As the title of *Borderlands/La Frontera*'s first chapter, "The Homeland Aztlán/*El Otro México*" ("The Other Mexico") serves as Anzaldúa's starting point. The text immediately makes clear, in prose and poetry, that she has wrought changes on the Chicano/a identity politics theme.

Otros "Movimientos de Rebeldía": *Feminism, Lesbian Feminism, and Borderlands/La Frontera*

Other "*Movimientos de rebeldía*" ("Movements of Rebellion")—the title of *Borderlands/La Frontera*'s second chapter—demand Anzaldúa's attention as they play equally important roles in forming her mestiza existence. In the chapter titled "*La conciencia de la mestiza/Towards a New Consciousness*," Anzaldúa declares that "the struggle of the mestiza is above all a feminist one" (106). She does not prioritize gender over race, class, and sexuality, but seeks to show the connections between the types of oppression and to establish feminism as a multi-issue fight against all of them. In so doing, she strikes themes present in lesbian feminism from its early days, even if they had been drowned out by the more limited vision that later came to dominate the movement in some quarters. By this last prose chapter of the text, Anzaldúa has built a strong case against racism and explored the forms it takes against Chicanos/as specifically; she has uncovered sexism and homophobia in Chicano/a culture, as in the dominant culture. Here she calls on the new mestiza to embrace all border crossers—even the queers, the most reviled *atravesados* of all—to join forces in a feminist movement to change the world:

Being the supreme crossers of cultures, homosexuals have strong bonds with the queer white, Black, Asian, Native American, Latino, and with the queer in Italy, Australia and the rest of the planet. We come from all colors, all classes, all races, all time periods. Our role is to link people with each other. (106)

By queering the mestiza, Anzaldúa performs a maneuver akin to Sedgwick's "universalizing" move, even as she harks back to Judy Grahn's folkloric study *Another Mother Tongue*.

While the themes and time frame of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and Latina lesbian identity poetics more generally, seem to fit perfectly with the post-modernism of multiple identities, they also are remarkably similar to earlier lesbian-feminist forms, which took their cue from other, earlier (and to some degree simultaneous) civil rights and cultural nationalist movements. The lesbian-feminist poetic project shares some of the hallmarks of "classic Chicano poetics" as described by Pérez-Torres: giving voice to silenced communities, revealing and criticizing oppressive assumptions and practices, and "foreground[ing] issues of identity formation" including self-naming and revisionary mythmaking (*Movements*, 6, 16, 17). Both poetics are "inti-

mately linked to the political struggles" of a people (12). Pérez-Torres notes the influence of feminism on the shift from the polemical, and typically narrative, Movimiento poetry of the 1960s to the more local and intimate (often lyric) poetry of the eighties and nineties. The rising prominence of public "Chicana self-identification" has been part of the localization of politics,

often crystallizing around sexual and gender issues, worker's rights and environmental issues, worker safety and immigration laws. The poetry evokes political discourses crossed at the site of the individual. . . . The later poetic work articulates on a personal level the disenfranchisement of and potential hope available to members of a dispossessed margin. (*Movements*, 13)

Borderlands/La Frontera is most often lauded for its mixed-genre first half and, partly because of its form, frequently categorized as a poststructuralist hybrid work of theory. The predominance of poetry in the text—an entire book's worth as the second half of the volume, and continually intruding on the prose first half—links it to both the lesbian-feminist movement (so prominently marked by its poet-theorists) and to the identity politics of El Movimiento. Poetry has fueled both movements from their inception, and it has remained important to them even if Pérez-Torres is right that the general audience for poetry in the United States has shrunk. As he notes, "Within the 'marginal' realms of Chicana and other multicultural literatures, the import and effect of poetry cannot be easily dismissed" (*Movements*, 20).

The evolution of *Borderlands/La Frontera* as a text shows its anchor in lesbian feminism and its evolution into poststructuralist queer theory, the aspect of the book that has received most attention. Originally, *Borderlands/La Frontera* was conceptualized as a straightforward volume of poems, with a ten-page prose introduction, but the ten pages grew to ninety-three plus endnotes (Adams, "Northamerican Silences," 134; Pinkvoss, personal communication, 1999).¹³ The importance of genre is reflected in Anzaldúa's various biographical notes. Although *Borderlands/La Frontera* is her only published volume of poetry, and despite critics' nearly exclusive focus on the book's first half, Anzaldúa describes herself as "poet" in all of her own books and in most of the volumes in which her work (prose or poetry) appears. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*'s roots as a volume of poetry and in Anzaldúa's naming herself "poet" (even "lesbian-feminist" poet in some instances),¹⁴ the book and its author belong squarely in the evolving tradition of Grah, Parker, Lorde, and Rich.

It is not merely form but theme that links Anzaldúa to her lesbian-feminist predecessors and *comadres*. Like them, Anzaldúa is centrally concerned with the task of self-naming. That her project goes beyond the singular nomenclature "lesbian" reflects, as with Lorde, both her sense of self and her affinity with the postmodernism of multiple identities. If most attention has been paid to Anzaldúa's self-naming in the first half of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, it is in part because the poems are less straightforwardly concerned with defining terms, though still focused on defining a self to which the terms are applicable. Anzaldúa announces herself as a lesbian in "*Compañera, cuando nos amábamos*" and "Interface" (170–74), which both describe physical intimacy and emotional intensity between women. The lover in "Interface" is a "noumenal" being, called "a lez" by the narrator's brother, who cannot understand the spiritual depths of the lovers' relationship. In "*Canción de la diosa de la noche*" ("Song of the goddess of the night," 218–21), Anzaldúa describes a goddess-centered spiritual worldview fueled by that which the dominant culture discards, including its gay and lesbian members.

Now, I drum on the carcass of the world
 creating crises to recall my name.
 The filth you relegate to Satan,
 I absorb. I convert.
 When I dance it burgeons out
 as song.
 I seek *la diosa*
 darkly awesome.
 In love with my own kind,
 I know you and inspire you.
 All others flee from me. (ll. 65–75)

As she names herself spiritually, she names herself lesbian, "in love with my own kind."

Anzaldúa proudly names herself Chicana throughout *Borderlands/La Frontera*, a self-naming as politically charged as "lesbian." Alarcón explains,

The name Chicana, in the present, is the name of resistance that enables cultural and political points of departure and thinking through the multiple migrations and dislocations of women of "Mexican" descent. The name Chicana is not a name that women (or men) are born to or with. . . . It serves as the point of redeparture for dismantling historical conjunctures of crisis, confusion, political and ideological conflict, and contradictions of

the simultaneous effects of having "no names," having "many names," not "know[ing] her names," and being someone else's "dreamwork." ("Chicana Feminism," 374)¹⁵

In step with Alarcón's definition of "Chicana" as implying a multifaceted critique and involving self-identification, two of Anzaldúa's poems explicitly delineate her difference within a larger Chicano context. "*Cihuatl*otl, Woman Alone" (195) is Anzaldúa's declaration of independence from the oppressive expectations of "*Raza* / father mother church" (ll. 1–2) whose "soft brown / landscape, tender *nopalitos*" ("prickly pears," ll. 12–13, a commonplace in South Texas Mexican diet, and a recurrent image in Anzaldúa's poems) are "beckoning beckoning" (l. 12) but carry a price too high for her to pay: "No self, / only race *vecindad familia*" ("community," lit. "neighborhood," "family," ll. 21, 22). The right and left justification of the poem's margins on the page echo the narrator's justification of her break with her people:

... My soul has always
been yours one spark in the roar of your fire.
We Mexicans are collective animals. This I
accept but my life's work requires autonomy
like oxygen. (ll. 22–26)

Her "life's work" is both the creation of art and her self-creation, what she calls "making soul" in the title of and introduction to her anthology *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras*. In "*Cihuatl*otl, Woman Alone," Anzaldúa is not only "woman" alone but all of the entities that make up her mestiza "soul. I remain who I am, multiple / and one of the herd, yet not of it" (ll. 30–31). Spinning a twist on the liberal Christian theologian Paul Tillich, who wrote of God as "the ground of all being," Anzaldúa asserts,

... I walk
on the ground of my own being browned and
hardened by the ages. I am fully formed carved
by the hands of the ancients, drenched with
the stench of today's headlines. But my own
hands whittle the final work me. (ll. 31–36)

Anzaldúa turns neither to Tillich's God nor the Catholic God of her own upbringing (indeed in several poems she invokes *la diosa*, the goddess), but to her hard-won, evolving sense of self.

Nopalitos, the food that beckons the narrator of "*Cihuatllyotl*, Woman Alone" to her home culture, is the title of another poem of self-definition wrought in contrast to her family and community of origin. The first six stanzas of "*Nopalitos*" (134–35) set a languorous South Texas stage, full of the smells, tastes, and sights of Anzaldúa's beloved homeland on a shimmering hot, late afternoon. The last sentence of stanza 6 shifts the poem from a pastoral reminiscence to a melancholy recognition—completed, as the sentence is finished, in stanza 7—that she no longer fully belongs. The tone pivots on the first word of the sentence, "Though," as the poem turns from a vivid tableau into a more abstract explanation of the narrator's position:

Though I'm part of their *camaradería*
am one of them

I left and have been gone a long time.
I keep leaving and when I am home
they remember no one but me had ever left.
I listen to the *grillos* [cicadas] more intently
than I do their *regaños* [scoldings].
I have more languages than they,
am aware of every root of my *pueblo* [people];
they, my people, are not.
They are the living, sleeping roots. (ll. 48–58)

The narrator mourns the necessary loss that leads to her self-actualization as an artist, a lesbian, an individual. She, like Cihuatllyotl, may be independent, educated, and strong, but she is also alone and sad: "I sweep up mesquite leaves, / thorns embedded in my flesh, / stings behind my eyes" (ll. 59–61).

"To live in the Borderlands means you" (216–17) explains that she is embattled as well. The poem exemplifies Anzaldúa's mestiza existence as neither one thing nor another, but a mixture of "*hispana india negra española* / . . . *mestiza mulata*, half-breed / caught in the cross-fire between camps" ("Hispanic, Indian, black, Spanish / . . . *mestiza*, mulatto, half-breed," ll. 1–3). The poem's first seven stanzas describe the splits, estrangements, and border wars that threaten the mestiza, but the eighth and final stanza delivers Anzaldúa's solution to the conflict: "To survive the Borderlands / you must live *sin fronteras* [without borders] / be a crossroads" (ll. 40–42). Figured elsewhere as a "bridge" (Anzaldúa, "Bridge, Drawbridge"; Moraga and Anzaldúa, *This Bridge*), here as throughout *Borderlands/La Frontera* Anzal-

dúa shares her vision of la mestiza ushering in a new age of alliance. In the chapter "*La conciencia de la mestiza/Towards a New Consciousness*" she implores Chicanos/as "to acknowledge the political and artistic contributions of their queer. People, listen to what your *jotería* [queers/faggotry] is saying" (107). Similarly, though she acknowledges that some people of color do not want to work with white people on racism, she writes that "I, for one, choose to use some of my energy to serve as mediator. I think we need to allow whites to be our allies. . . . They will come to see that they are not helping us but following our lead" (107).

One of the few critics to write extensively about Anzaldúa's poetry, Ann E. Reuman focuses on the "intense and unrelenting threats of violence" confronting Anzaldúa "as a poor Mexican-American, a woman, a lesbian, and a writer" ("Wild Tongues," 306). While Reuman's readings of the poems are astute, the picture she paints is incomplete until the second half of her essay, when she shows how Anzaldúa's poems serve in the healing process, fighting back against the violence they describe. Reuman remarks upon Anzaldúa's poems of sometimes literal physical dismemberment (e.g., "Holy Relics," 176–81, inspired by Grahn's "Marilyn Monroe Poem" [Perry, "Interview," 25], "The Cannibals' *Canción*," 165); crucially, the new mestiza re-members, reassembling all her parts into a new whole, often using memory, history, and legend as ingredients. She speaks, to quote Adrienne Rich, "a whole new language" as she "re-visions" past, present, and future in her prophetic text. In this sense she shares a great deal with Lorde, another poet of many "cross-roads."¹⁶

Especially powerful in narrative mode, Anzaldúa describes herself through stories of spiritual, emotional, and political journeys. "I Had to Go Down" (189–91), for example, is a classic Jungian dream sequence in which the narrator is drawn to the dark, creepy basement of an old house to confront her fears and finds only herself:

Then I heard the footsteps again
making scuffing sounds
on the packed dirt floor.
It was my feet making them.
It had been my footsteps I'd heard. (ll. 88–92)

In "*Antigua, mi diosa*" (Ancient, my goddess, 210–11), she describes being filled with the light of her goddess, like an ax blow, resulting in a lifelong journey following in her footsteps, searching her out: "*Descalza, gateando a*

ciegas voy / sigo tus huellas ligeras y tu linaje viejo" ("Barefoot, crawling blindly I go / I follow your light tracks and your ancient lineage," ll. 1–2); "*ahora por todas las tierras vulneradas te busco*" ("now through all the damaged lands I search for you," l. 48).¹⁷

"That dark shining thing" (193–94) shows most clearly the confluence of Anzaldúa's spiritual and political identities as well as her chosen role as activist bridge builder or crossroads. Anzaldúa addresses herself to those "Colored, poor white, latent queer / passing as white" (ll. 10–11) who choose "that closet" (l. 3) of internalized oppression but who simultaneously "elected me to pry open a crack / . . . choose me to pick at the masks" (ll. 5, 16). The narrator describes herself as the visible token, "the only round face, / Indian-beaked, off-colored / in the faculty lineup, the workshop, the panel / and reckless enough to take you on" (ll. 17–20). For her troubles, she is abused, but much as she wants to she cannot turn her back, because she remembers her own self-hatred and process of rebirth, helped along by midwives like the one she has become. Anzaldúa highlights the importance of naming to the process of giving birth to "that dark shining thing,"

. . . the numinous thing
it was black and it had my name
it spoke to me and I spoke to it.

Here we are four women stinking with guilt
you for not speaking your names
me for not holding out my hand sooner.
I don't know how long I can keep naming
that dark animal
coaxing it out of you, out of me
keep calling it good or woman-god
while everyone says no no no. (ll. 48–58)

Anzaldúa's narrator acknowledges and embraces "that Beast" (l. 59) within herself that represents all she has been told to fear and despise; she recognizes that owning it, looking at "the pain . . . the fear / that all my life had walked beside me" (ll. 46–47) is a matter of "*vida o muerte*, life or death" (l. 67).

The narrator's acceptance of "the Beast" and "that dark shining thing" resolve, to some extent, Anzaldúa's struggles with dark and black aspects of herself, which recur in poems such as "*Cagado abismo, quiero saber*," "*Matriz sin tumba*," ("Womb without a grave," 158–60), and "*Canción de la diosa de*

la noche," three poems set in "*una noche oscura*" ("a dark night," "*Matriz sin tumba*," l. 11). Anzaldúa fights the cultural pressure to consider that which is dark evil, harmful, or fearful, but she acknowledges that she has been taught to do so; darkness in her poems often signals emotional and spiritual turmoil that must be traveled through, or repressed states that must be reclaimed, like the "Shadow-Beast" of chapter 2, the internal image of the lust and desire that we have been taught to loathe:

To avoid rejection, some of us conform to the values of the culture, push the unacceptable parts into the shadows. Which leaves only one fear—that we will be found out and that the Shadow-Beast will break out of its cage. Some of us take another route. We try to make ourselves conscious of the Shadow-Beast, stare at the sexual lust and lust for power and destruction we see on its face, discern among its features the undershadow that the reigning order of heterosexual males project on our Beast. Yet still others of us take it another step: we try to waken the Shadow-Beast inside us. . . . A few of us have been lucky—on the face of the Shadow-Beast we have seen not lust but tenderness; on its face we have uncovered the lie. (42)

This is the positive potential of "the Beast" that the narrator of "that dark shining thing" urges others to embrace, but the dominant culture coerces most of us to silence the Beast, to refuse our names.

Reading Queerly: The Postmodernism of Borderlands/La Frontera

"Mestiza" is the name Anzaldúa most consistently applies to herself in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Anzaldúa's multiple sense of self, her frequent use of the term *queer* and the prominence of her writings in the late 1980s and early 1990s make it tempting to place her in the rising tide of queer theory—and several commentators have done so. Anzaldúa's work has had an important influence on the rise of queer theory, and many people who write about her call her work poststructuralist or queer theory; at the same time, however, most people who write about queer theory ignore her, as they ignore the work of most lesbians of color. Critics who with hindsight place *Borderlands/La Frontera* squarely in the poststructuralist camp ignore Anzaldúa's simultaneous self-naming as lesbian, lesbian feminist, and dyke¹⁸—and sometimes remove her work from its Chicano/a context in order to discuss it primarily as queer.¹⁹ One of the better critical essays linking a lesbian of color to the foundational ideas of queer theory, Ian Barnard's "Gloria

Anzaldúa's *Queer Mestizaje*," nevertheless paradoxically misses half the story, that Anzaldúa's work illuminates the points of connection between lesbian-feminist identity politics and poststructuralist queer theory, not merely (nor even necessarily) the differences.

Barnard's essay comes out aggressively pro-queer and disparagingly anti-gay-and-lesbian from its first pages. Oddly, Barnard then praises queer theory and politics for possessing one of identity politics' primary strengths, its emphasis on reclaiming derogatory terms for politicized self-naming (37). Like many others who build the (not insignificant) case for Anzaldúa's relevance to queer theory, Barnard notes Anzaldúa's invocation of *queer* and conveniently, if disingenuously, ignores her several uses of *lesbian*. The use of *queer* in *Borderlands/La Frontera* certainly predates its widespread adoption as the basis of a movement, political or academic (Barnard, "Gloria Anzaldúa's," 38), but her use of *lesbian* and *feminist* in the same text are no less significant and are made possible by the groundwork laid by lesbian feminism, a movement in which Anzaldúa participated.²⁰ Barnard's blind spot is all the more curious given his perception that Anzaldúa adroitly combines her queer "contestatory politics" with "lived experience," that is, at least in some respect, a politics of identity (44). For Barnard, Anzaldúa's positioning is exemplary queer theory; he misses the connection of her "complex identity narration" (to cite an apt term coined by Diane Fowlkes) to her identity politics and lesbian feminism. Barnard terms Anzaldúa's *mestiza* "metaphoric" (44), and perhaps that is where his analysis ultimately goes astray. Anzaldúa is not *really* just one side of her multifaceted racial identity, sexuality, or geographic home base. She is not *really* queer as opposed to lesbian; she states again and again that she is *really mestiza*, both/and/neither: "To live in the Borderlands," she writes, "means you / are neither *hispana india negra española / ni gabacha, eres mestiza mulata, half-breed*" ("neither Hispanic, Indian, black, Spanish / nor white, you are *mestiza*, mulatto, half-breed").

Barnard also cites Anzaldúa's 1991 essay "To(o) Queer the Writer" as an example of queer theory written by a person of color (38). It is true that Anzaldúa rejects the label *lesbian* in favor of *queer* in the essay; as she explains in a 1993 interview,

When everybody says "lesbian," a word connected with Sappho and the island of Lesbos, that automatically means that your forefathers and foremothers are European, that George Washington is the father of our country and Columbus discovered America—all false assumptions. The word

"lesbian" was sufficient when I first came out: Being a lesbian meant that I had a community, albeit a *gringa* community. (Perry, "Interview," 32)

However, in "To(o) Queer the Writer" Anzaldúa clearly is hostile toward appropriation of the work of people of color by white activists and theorists, both "lesbian" and "queer." For a queer theorist to claim Anzaldúa's allegiance is a misreading of the content and tone of her essay. Anzaldúa makes this clear in another 1993 interview in which she refers to "To(o) Queer the Writer":

I think that the white dykes really want a community that's diversified. Sometimes they want it so badly that they want to put everybody under this queer umbrella: "We're all in this together and we're all equal." But we are not equal. . . . The greater our numbers the more power we have as queers. Bringing us under this queer umbrella is a kind of survival tactic. But often in order to bring us under the queer umbrella they ignore differences, collapse the differences, not really deal with the issue. . . . I wrote an essay called 'To(o) Queer the Writer' that deals with these concerns. (*Interviews/Entrevistas*, 208)

In any event, Anzaldúa does not entirely foreswear use of the word *lesbian*; in the interview in which she explains her preference for *queer*, she refers to herself as lesbian five times (she employs *dyke*, a term reclaimed by lesbian feminists, four times), while only using *queer* when explaining why she prefers it to *lesbian* (Perry, "Interview"). In interviews ranging from 1982 to 1999, Anzaldúa uses *queer*, *lesbian*, and *dyke* more or less interchangeably. Phelan reminds readers of *Borderlands/La Frontera* that Anzaldúa's "we"

shifts from page to page, meaning sometimes queers, sometimes Chicanos/Chicanas, sometimes feminists. Her contextualization of this shifting "we" removes the possibility of reading her statements as simple calls for unity, instead calling on us to acknowledge all of her locations at once and equally. (66)

Anzaldúa's text is not unproblematically part of a queer theory canon, nor should her work be dismissed as irrelevant to or entirely divorced from it. (The same, as I have been arguing, must be said for her relationship to lesbian feminism.) The two inform one another, in some cases, and without question overlap in substance and concept if not always form. Phelan deftly captures the "specificity" of Anzaldúa's work with respect to poststructuralism, explaining that Anzaldúa's shifting positionality

does not mean that Anzaldúa "is postmodern," or that every aspect of the *mestiza* is replicated and captured by poststructuralist theory. The belongingness of the *mestiza* for Anzaldúa is not simply a matter of choice, of voluntary affiliation, but of history and social density. In that evocation of history and rebellion, and in her political commitment, she is allied with Michel Foucault. She is not simply "Foucauldian," however, as if reading Foucault would tell us what Anzaldúa thinks. (*Getting Specific*, 66–67)

Phelan's contribution warns against Barnard's variety of co-optation of Anzaldúa to queer theory. Another version goes beyond conflating the two, seemingly reversing the chronology of published ideas if not direct theoretical influence. Jennifer Browdy de Hernández, for example, has queer theory influencing Anzaldúa and Lorde, whose referenced work prefigures it:

In *Gender Trouble* [published in 1990], [Judith] Butler argues that identity can be 'proliferated' subversively, in a way that breaks out of binary oppositions. . . . Anzaldúa and Lorde take Butler's oppositional strategy even further, proliferating identity not only in terms of gender but also in terms of race, class, ethnicity, and other even more marginalized affinities, such as Anzaldúa's Chicana mysticism and Lorde's Afrocentrist mysticism. ("Mothering," 253)²¹

In the same essay Browdy de Hernández terms Anzaldúa and Lorde "queer theorists *avant-la-lettre*," at least putting things in correct historical order (244–45). Pérez-Torres links the material to the theoretical, perhaps nailing most accurately the connection between the two, as he contradicts Browdy de Hernández French term for term: "Chicanos have [not] formed a postmodern culture *avant la lettre*. . . . Chicanos have lived and survived (which is a form of triumph over) the disparities made plain by the critical light of postmodernism" (*Movements*, 4). That Anzaldúa theorizes and versifies from the basis of that theorizably postmodern experience makes her what we might perhaps best call a materialist poet-theorist, a practitioner of identity poetics.

Shifting Genres: From Poetry to Theory

Since the birth of lesbian feminism in the early 1970s, and through the 1980s, a cultural shift of emphasis has taken place within feminism—certainly

within the academy—to theory and away from poetry. Theory as a language has gained cultural capital as the study of women writers has declined from the heyday of rediscovering authors in the late 1970s. This period of the growth of cultural studies and queer theory also has seen the decline of venues for lesbian poetry such as feminist bookstores, lesbian coffeehouses, lesbian-feminist newspapers, and independent lesbian and feminist publishing houses. The story of the theory section of *Borderlands/La Frontera* growing out of an otherwise self-sustaining volume of poetry provides a neat metaphor for the shift from the poetry-centered lesbian-feminist movement (in which Anzaldúa has roots) to the prose-theory-centered queer movement (which has taken her up and which she, to some extent, now embraces). The evolution of the book echoes Audre Lorde's explanation of the evolution of poetry into theory into activist movement—which in light of the shift of genre central to the movement could be seen as prophetic. The evolution of *Borderlands/La Frontera* also plays out at least one of Anzaldúa's description of how she works:

First there has to be something that is bothering me . . . Then I start meditating on it. . . . Usually I come up with something visual of what I am feeling. . . . So behind this feeling there is this image, this visual, and I have to figure out what the articulation of this image is. That's how I get into the theory. I start theorizing about it. But it always comes from a feeling. (Ikas, "Interview," 236)

If feeling and image are more traditionally associated with poetry, then this passage reads very similarly to Lorde's from "Poetry Is Not a Luxury": "[Poetry] forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought" (*Sister*, 37). Anzaldúa similarly indicates that poetry and theory are two different, equally viable forms for expressing ideas, if perhaps to different audiences.

When I start with an idea . . . I want to be able to unravel it for different readers—for the academic professors and students as well as for children and the average person. I want to do it through different media, through poetry, fiction and through theory because each of these genres enriches the others. (Ikas, "Interview, 235–36)

Academics have devoted reams to *Borderlands/La Frontera's* theorizing, and nearly all account for the genre *mestizaje* that produces what they frequently

call "poetic prose," but almost no one writes about Anzaldúa's poems. In an essay titled "Crossing Borders: An Aesthetic Practice in Writings by Gloria Anzaldúa," Monika Kaup typically refers to Anzaldúa's "diverse centers of consciousness—both poetic and academic," setting up the traditional binary split. Kaup goes further, noting the division of the book into "two parts, the first consisting of cultural description, the second poetry, the first concerned with fact, the second with fiction" (105). To focus on the prose writing of the book's first half, Kaup must intentionally dismiss the fact that even the first chapter of the first half begins with a poem, introducing her analysis with the direction to ignore the primary placement of poetry, "In these first sentences of the book (if we leave aside an introductory poem)" (107), as if the conspicuous prioritizing of poetry in the text were somehow negligible.

Anzaldúa's poems fare little better in the hands of a multitude of other scholars. María Lugones's frequently quoted essay, "On *Borderlands/La Frontera*: An Interpretive Essay," ignores the poems of the second half of the text, mentioning only an untitled poem in chapter 4. In "Texas Border Literature," Héctor Calderón makes no mention of the poetry, treating *Borderlands/La Frontera* as straightforward *testimonio*, or prose autobiography. Browdy de Hernández actually asserts that "*Borderlands* ends" on page 91, with the end of the prose chapters ("Mothering," 259). A few critics provide suggestions, but almost no one actually explicates the poetry at any length. Even the introduction to the second edition spends four times the number of pages discussing the prose section as the poetry section.

It is somewhat ironic, given the book's striving against academic co-optation—its resistance, at least, to traditions of genre and its rewriting of colonialist history—that there is so much scholarly writing about *Borderlands/La Frontera* as a theoretical text. The best of this scholarship takes into account the genre mix of the "theory half" of the book, but virtually all of it acts as though that is the only text that exists, or matters. By the early 1990s, when the fifteenth-anniversary retrospective issue of the lesbian-feminist journal *Sinister Wisdom* was published, Anzaldúa was calling herself a "Chicana *tejana* dyke-feminist poet-writer-theorist" (emphasis added) in her contributor's note. Clearly influenced by the changing winds in feminism and the academic reception of her *Borderlands/La Frontera*, by 1998's *Living Chicana Theory* Anzaldúa termed herself "a queer Chicana Tejana feminist patlache poet, fictionist, and cultural theorist" (Trujillo, *Living*). The second edition of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, published in 1999, announces the book's adoption as an academic text in a number of ways, including a critical introduction attentive to its reception and its place in theoretical debates and an interview with

Anzaldúa that highlights the importance of the author as a theorist to contend with. Promotional copy on the back cover also testifies to the book's incorporation into academia. The label "Chicana Studies/Women's Studies" in the upper right corner categorizes it as a text for classroom use (though curiously not for American literature classes). Cover copy also positions the text academically as "a book that speaks across fields." The publisher prominently announces the inclusion in the new edition of a "critical introduction" written by Sonia Saldívar-Hull, "Associate Professor of English at UCLA and author of *Feminism on the Border*," understood to be scholarly and validating Chicana feminist studies as an accepted field of scholarship. Indeed, the multiple printings of *Borderlands/La Frontera*'s first edition and the publication of a second edition were made possible by its widespread classroom use.

Borderlands/La Frontera in its academic setting is read largely as a work of cultural theory by feminists, Chicano/a studies scholars, cultural studies scholars, and queer theorists, as the multitude of critical articles and the introduction to the second edition make clear:

While *estudios de la frontera* (border studies) certainly were not invented by Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands*, this book signaled a new visibility for academic programs on the study of the U.S.-Mexico border area. . . .

This *transfrontera*, transdisciplinary text also crossed rigid boundaries in academia as it traveled between Literature (English and Spanish), History, American Studies, Anthropology and Political Science departments, and further illuminated multiple theories of feminism in women's studies and Chicana studies. (Saldívar-Hull, "Introduction," 12-13)

While the poets in this study, including Anzaldúa, and the lesbian-feminist movement generally see their poetry as integrally, activistly theoretical, academics do not. By most scholarly lights, if the critical writing on Anzaldúa is any guide, poets are allowed to write (prose) theory (though usually not what is termed "high theory"), but their poetry is not acknowledged as theory in its own right.

The "poetry half" of *Borderlands/La Frontera* presents other problems that perhaps lie behind critics' neglect of it. Anzaldúa herself hints at two of them in the interview appended to the second edition. First, she suggests that audience varies for different genres of writing. She does not seem to expect "academic professors" to turn to literature for theoretical ideas (Ikas, "Interview," 235), an insight perhaps born of her experience as a doctoral student. In another interview, Anzaldúa explains this concept further, at least by

implication. "High theorists," she says, are intolerant of discussions about spirituality, at least as much as they seem averse to poetry. And Anzaldúa's poetry is rife with references to her abiding spiritual worldview. "They equate . . . essentialism with spirituality," Anzaldúa explains, "and I don't" (Keating, "Writing," 114). While there exist some fine examples of critical writing about Anzaldúa's prose writing on spirituality,²² most academics focus on Anzaldúa's racial and sexual politics, the innovations of her particular conceptions of *mestiza* and *queer*, and her relevance to poststructuralist, postcolonialist, and/or *queer* theory.

Anzaldúa asserts that it is her anger that is ignored by many scholars, and she considers their aversion to discussing aspects of the text with which they cannot identify racist (Ikas, "Interview," 232; Perry, "Interview," 31). Certainly, several of the poems express, provoke, or seek to inspire anger (e.g., "*sus plumas el viento*," "Cultures," "We Call Them Greasers," "Corner of 50th St. and Fifth Av.," "Cuyamaca"). But anger is not the only difficulty that is being avoided. Poetry, itself, is difficult—a code to be cracked, a nonlinear and emotive discourse. Like Lorde's poetry, Anzaldúa's presents the additional barrier of cultural difference for the non-Chicana reader through its Chicano, mexicano, and *nahuatl* references. Though foregrounded by the exposition of the first half of the book, the images still require work on the reader's part. The additional difficulty for English-only readers of Anzaldúa's liberal use of Spanish likely also contributes to the neglect of the poems. (Could it be this making critics angry, rather than Anzaldúa's anger making critics avoid the poems? Both?) If the abstract concept of *mestizaje* can be appropriated by white readers and readers of color alike, the specific imagery of poetry cannot. Anzaldúa's verse resists appropriation, is perceived as being of no use to dominant academic theories, and is therefore ignored—considered "literature," perhaps, but of no consequence to theorists who trade in a different medium. (Judith Roof observes that "difference is erased as difference and made the same in the name of theory"; i.e., the difference that matters, when constructing a theoretical narrative, is whether something is "theory" or "nontheory" [*Lure*, 226].)²³

Anzaldúa's tendency to work on several projects, in several genres, at once (Ikas, "Interview," 244–45) and the genre *mestizaje* within *Borderlands/La Frontera* are analogous to the multiple identities embodied by Anzaldúa as *mestiza* and in that sense clearly aligned with a poststructuralist reading of her self-concept and her work. The second half of the book, a straightforward (one might even say "old-fashioned") collection of poems, belongs more obviously to the lesbian-feminist tradition of Grahn and Parker (not

known as essayists) and Lorde and Rich (essayists known separately as poets). The first half of the book looks like theory, sounds like theory—and sexy, postmodern theory, at that—so it must be theory, and therefore worthy of comment. The poetry requires literary decoding, embodies the wrong genre, and therefore is assumed to be of little importance to the queer theoretical project, its content never considered, though it so clearly mirrors the concerns of the rest of the book.

The most generous reading of the incorporation of Anzaldúa's "poetic" text into the theoretical cannon is that the estimation of literature as theoretical—that is to say, as existing shoulder to shoulder with the genre currently most valued by academics—is being accorded to *Borderlands/La Frontera*. The selective attention to sections of *Borderlands/La Frontera* and the neglect of Anzaldúa's poems leads to a more parsimonious assessment. In addition to calling for placing Anzaldúa's poems, like the other four poets' here, in an activist theoretical tradition, I also protest, with postcolonialist critic Vilashini Cooppan, that "We must do resistance literature the honor of treating it as literature" ("Writing").

Obviously, focusing *only* on Anzaldúa's poetry is as problematic as ignoring it outright. I do not intend to contribute to the notion that women of color don't, or can't, "do theory," but only do literature and/or experience.²⁴ I am arguing that poetry is theory, but that it is also literature and should be discussed as such—that we do it a disservice to leave the available critical tools unused when the poetry (or fiction, for that matter) seems to carry other than purely "literary" (read white, male, pre-postmodern?) content. I am arguing more broadly that activist theory—what the anthropologist Kath Weston calls "street theorizing"—is theory ("Theory," 145). That finally the categories break down, Anzaldúa's point all along.